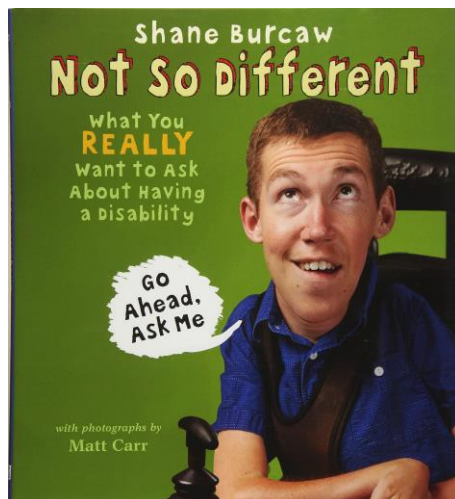


## First Opinion: Inquiring Minds Want to Know: Real Talk with Shane Burcaw

Burcaw, Shane. *Not So Different: What You Really Want to Ask About Having a Disability*. Illustrated by Matt Carr. New York: Roaring Book Press, 2017. Print.

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Shane Burcaw answers some of the most common questions he gets about his disability, spinal muscular atrophy, in his book *Not So Different: What You Really Want to Ask About Having a Disability*. Shane Burcaw is fearless, candid, and humorous in his responses throughout the book. The photographs by Matt Carr are beautiful and capture Shane's quirkiness and outgoing personality; they are windows into his life.

Upon receiving this book for review, I was immediately struck by its cover—a playful photograph of Shane Burcaw (author) and a speech bubble stating, “Go ahead, ask me.” I wondered how might children react to the “in your face” image of Shane in his wheelchair. The photograph of Shane along with his invitation for children to ask questions is intentional. Shane Burcaw encourages readers to react and draws on children's inquisitive nature. The endpapers are a sequence of four photographs of Shane and a child walking past him. In the third photograph, the child stops for a moment to look at Shane. Shane smiles at the child, but the child continues walking past him. There is a look of disappointment on Shane's face in the final photograph. It signals a missed opportunity to explore and develop an understanding of difference and disability with the child that chose not to stop. The juxtaposition of the

book's cover and the endpapers highlight the need for creating spaces for children to think beyond superficial social constructions of disability (Dudley-Marling, 482-489; Jones, 347-354).

This book is powerful in the way Shane humanizes disability and also liberatory in the breaking of social norms that are considered to be taboo like, "don't stare," or "it's not nice to ask questions about..." However, if children are restricted from asking questions and from critically examining social constructions of disability, then how will children develop a critical understanding of disability and inclusion that disrupts deficit notions? For example, Shane Burcaw first addresses the big question, "What's wrong with you?" (Burcaw unpagged). Your eyes are immediately drawn to the family photos displayed across the pages. These photographs help the reader to understand Shane as he explains, "Absolutely nothing is wrong with me. I'm just a little different!" (unpagged). It is in this moment that Shane sets the tone for the book. Difference is not wrong. Disability is not wrong. I can envision children giggling at the photo of Shane picking his nose with his friends making goofy faces at the camera. Shane's humor plays an important role throughout his book. His playfulness and sense of humor are salient in his answers, which allows the reader to further engage and connect with Shane.

Shane Burcaw also helps the reader understand that he is not that different; in fact, there are many similarities that Shane shares with most individuals. Shane plays soccer, eats pizza, and likes to goof off with his friends and family. Most importantly, he also shows the reader how assumptions and making fun of a person for their difference can be hurtful. "I believe it's very important not to judge a book by its cover, so when you meet someone who looks different from you, it's always best to treat them with kindness and respect" (unpagged). Shane reminds the reader to be compassionate. One's words and actions can hurt.

In conclusion, the book invites readers to gain a more nuanced understanding of difference through the eyes of Shane Burcaw. Through an interactive read aloud, this book can generate a critical discussion on the ways disabilities are conceptualized and encourage children to think more deeply around deficit perspectives often associated with disability and difference.

### **Works Cited**

- Dudley-Marling, C. "The Social Construction of Learning Disabilities." *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 37(6), 482-489.
- Jones, S. R. (1996). "Toward Inclusive Theory". *NASPA Journal*, 33(4), 347-354.

### **About the Author**

**Doris Ann Villarreal** is an Assistant Professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. She is a former bilingual teacher with 13 years' experience. Her experiences as a bilingual elementary teacher in Texas have led to her interests in the improvement and support of educational programs that serve students from historically marginalized working-class communities. Her research interests include hybrid language practices in linguistically and culturally diverse teaching contexts with a focus on Latinx children as well as literacy teacher education. Her work has been published in *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice* and *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism and Practice*.